

Making a Good Truman Nomination Letter Slightly Better

by Tara Yglesias

The Truman nomination letter is the first item read whenever your candidate's application is reviewed. We expect the letter to provide an overview of the applicant while drawing our attention to particular areas of interest. Use of 'applicant' rather than application is intentional - this letter should thoroughly introduce us to the candidate and his or her passions and interests. This letter need not detail everything in the application. The nomination letter is the only letter that can effectively pull together all the threads of our application - leadership, service and academics - into a cohesive whole. Cohesive, however, does not mean long - we prefer letters that are around two typed pages.

A few tips for success:

Everyone is trying too hard. The best letters are like a charming introduction at a party - warm, authentic and seemingly effortless.

Nouns & verbs are better than adjectives. Your outstanding and mine may be two different things. Your "her recommendations were adopted by the University" and mine are exactly the same thing.

Underselling is better than overstating. Don't set the student up to be a disappointment.

Don't reveal too much or too little. We don't need a recap, but we want to learn something.

Err on the formal side. Letters that seem too familiar are sometimes noticed for the wrong reasons.

Ranking candidates is potentially confusing. Saying a candidate is your top choice is fine. But ranking the others presupposes that the same readers will read all applications - that is often not the case.

Comparing candidates is potentially risky. You have no idea how our readers feel about your last Scholar. They might find him so delightful that no one would possibly compare ("You, sir, are no Andy Rich!") or they might find her so repellent that the thought of another is just too much to bear.

A bit of white space is nice. Break the letter into smaller paragraphs. The readers will love you when they are on file #53 of day 2.

Make the nomination letter a priority. Set aside time during the process to work on the letter. Documenting how you got to know the student over the course of the process might produce a very interesting letter.

Relax - and see point #1 above. If your candidate is strong, your letter can't possibly harm them. If your candidate is weak, your letter can't work a miracle.

To better illustrate these points, let's look at a mediocre sample. This sample was written based on a composite of many letters.

¹It is with great pleasure that Miskatonic University nominates Eve Shoggoth for the current Truman Scholarship Competition. We identified Eve as a sophomore and began grooming² her for application to major scholarship programs.³ After reviewing her application and conducting several practice interviews, we nominated Eve. Our committee was comprised of James Danforth (2010 Truman Scholar and graduate student in the political science department), Dr. Frank H. Pabodie (who holds the distinguished Cthulhu Chair in Engineering), Dr. Brian Lake (Chair of our Biology department), Dr. David Atwood (distinguished lecturer in physics), and myself, Dr. William Dyer (Truman Faculty Representative and full professor in Geology)⁴. After interviewing all four Miskatonic candidates, we universally agreed that Eve was solidly in second place.⁵

That is not to say that Eve isn't wholly impressive! Her GPA is a near perfect 3.9 in the incredibly difficult field of Political Science.⁶ Her GPA is even more amazing when one considers that Miskatonic, like few of its academic peers, wholly eschews grade inflation.⁷ Her major, one of the most difficult at Miskatonic, was responsible for her only A- grade.⁸

I have not had the good fortune of having Eve in my classes, so I don't know her academic talents first hand. Dr. Lake, who has had her in two upper-level courses, describes her intellect as "formidable" and points out that she consistently turns in the best papers in class.⁹ Dr. Pabodie states that Eve "is in the top 2-3% of undergraduates" that he has taught in his distinguished career. Just hearing the recommenders discuss her talents makes me wish she had taken more courses in Geology!¹⁰ While Eve's keen intellect is typical of Miskatonic students, she takes things a step farther by being a member of three separate honor societies, co-authoring two academic papers, tutoring incoming freshmen, sponsoring a great books club and organizing the student-led debating society, the Mi-go.¹¹ Mi-go is the pinnacle of intellectual pursuits here at Miskatonic and only the best and brightest need apply.¹²

But Eve's leadership in Mi-go is a just the tip of the iceberg! She is also a Student Senator on Miskatonic's highly selective student government. She founded the group Elder Things to work with

¹ Our system prints the letters just as you enter them. We do prefer a simple "Dear Selection Committee" or similar to break up the blocks of text that are to follow.

² This statement - and particularly this word - make it sound like this whole process wasn't really Eve's idea.

³ Now I don't feel special at all.

⁴ Most of our readers aren't looking for this level of detail - and none of them are looking for the lead paragraph to be about the Truman process on your campus. If you wish to include this much detail, please do so in a closing paragraph or after your signature block.

⁵ Where's #1? If he or she is in a different region, the group that reads this file will never see #1 and will always be left wondering. Worse still, what if we read #1 and weren't impressed? How should we now feel about Eve?

⁶ Academics, while important, are the least important of our criteria. Eve would be better served by a lead paragraph on leadership or service.

⁷ Please stop saying anything about grade inflation. Apparently, no one inflates grades and yet, here we are.

⁸ And? Essentially, we have highlighted a potential issue with her application and then provided no explanation.

⁹ I know nothing about Dr. Lake - so this sentence isn't nearly as helpful as one might think.

¹⁰ The first sentence set up that he didn't know Eve well - it isn't helpful to belabor the point.

¹¹ The letter need not run through everything in the application. Eve is starting to look a little scattered here.

¹² This paragraph contains very little helpful information. Whether I find this information useful depends on my being both aware of the academic reputation of Miskatonic and agreeing that the school is prestigious.

patients in a local nursing home facility. Although this project grew out of a class, Eve took things the next step by actually involving several friends in Elder Things.¹³ James Danforth, the faculty sponsor for the group and the author of one of Ms. Shoggoth's¹⁴ letters of recommendation concludes: "Eve used the resources of Miskatonic University as a way to profoundly impact the lives of people in our community through Elder Things."¹⁵

Which brings me to Eve's other activities. She is a member of Miskatonic's Gedney Club.¹⁶ Through Gedney, Eve has volunteered at an animal shelter, a nature preserve, rebuilding homes destroyed in a brutal ice storm, and on a very interesting project that allowed her to work on biology research in Antarctica!¹⁷ She also interned last year at the Nathaniel Derby Pickman Foundation, one of the largest private grant-making organizations in the country.¹⁸ This internship, open only to Miskatonic students,¹⁹ allowed her to explore her true passion: financial management of non-profits.²⁰ She came to this interest through her father who is himself an accountant with the United Way.²¹

Eve is also a pert, vibrant woman with brilliantly red hair. Her smile is disarming but beneath that charming exterior lurks the mind of a true scholar.²² She reminds me of Miskatonic's recent Truman Scholar, the brilliant Robert Olmstead.²³ Indeed, Eve is every bit the thoughtful, kind soul that Robert is – and then some. I can think of no one more deserving than Ms. Shoggoth.

24

25

¹³ Whenever something "grows out of a class," readers start getting suspicious. It is imperative to discuss how much the student did on her own and whether the project continues to be viable outside of the class project.

¹⁴ Either call the student by her first name or last name, but be consistent. Otherwise the letter seems disjointed.

¹⁵ You know what our readers like? Facts. "Eve grew Elder Things from a two person group to the second-largest service group on campus with 82 active members." Much more informative.

¹⁶ Assume that we aren't familiar with campus groups – a few words of introduction would be helpful.

¹⁷ Again, Eve sounds a little scattered.

¹⁸ By the way, she took a leave of absence to do this internship and readers are going to get confused when they read her transcript. Please include any gaps in schooling or significant work at other institutions in your letter.

¹⁹ Repeating the name of the school - no matter how prestigious - will not help the candidate.

²⁰ Wait, what? Don't bury the lede. The centerpiece of the letter should be the candidates' true passion – with selected related activities highlighted.

²¹ I'm not sure why the readers would need to know this bit of information. It casts a bit of a pall on Eve's passion to hear that she got it from her dad. Perhaps this should be left unsaid to be revealed in an interview.

²² Is this unseemly to you? It is - no matter the gender of the applicant or the writer. The tendency to discuss an applicant's personal appearance seems rooted in an effort to demonstrate the 'physical vitality' of a candidate. I'm not sure why this type of description is necessary, but if you are so inclined, please try to do so without making the letter sound like a passage from a romantic thriller.

²³ In general, readers don't care for comparisons with past Scholars. Either we don't know the Scholar and such comparisons seem grasping or we know the Scholar and disagree with your assessment.

²⁴ Please type your name at the bottom of your letter. It does not print there automatically.

²⁵ The Truman Rep should sign the letter - but we are not overly picky on this point. If the candidate would be better served by the Faculty Rep providing another recommendation letter, another member of the committee may sign the letter of nomination.